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CULTURE

Sainte-Beuve, I believe it is, is quoted as having once declared that everything has been asserted and also denied. Probably this could even be said, with no great appearance of being extravagant, about a limited period like, let us say, the last hundred years. We often hear the present time spoken of as an age of skepticism; but the truth is that it, like most other ages since civilization has been a wide-spread fact, is a vast heterogeneity, or conglomerate of all kinds of beliefs and unbeliefs. Doubtless, indeed, as we surpass in numbers the people of any other age, so also we surpass all other ages in the crazy variety of our affirmations and denials regarding human concerns in this world and in other worlds. As there are all sorts of people in the world, so there are all sorts of outlooks upon life and human destiny. There are, for example, at what most cultivated persons to-day would regard as one end of the scale of human intelligence, believers in the latest religion to be invented out of hand by some ego-maniac or other variety of mental unfortunate, and, at the other, believers in Darwin revised and brought up to date. Nevertheless, it is perhaps true that if we consider the organs of respectable opinion only, there is discernible an average tone and attitude to things in general, which gives some basis in fact for that tremendous phrase, "spirit of the age," to rest upon.

Thirty years ago, for example, in the days of Matthew Arnold, the educated world was a good deal interested in discussions appertaining to culture—what it was, for example, how it could

be secured, who ought to try to get it, and what, in general, its claims to consideration were in the fierce rivalry of things important for the world's attention. Apparently we no longer talk very much or very seriously about culture now. Doubtless Chautauqua lecturers, or some of them, still consider it a good thing for everybody to get a bit of at odd moments. The word culture is still used, also, around colleges and universities as a kind of vague shibboleth in that noisy but not very dreadful warfare which at such institutions is at all times waging between the advocates of the sciences and the advocates of the humanities. But our wise men talk rather less about culture now than wise men used to. The officially great of the earth, and the ex-officially great, never think, now, of the necessity of putting in an occasional word for culture as they go up and down the land, sermonizing upon the importance of honesty, energy, courage, and other old, respectable, and well-understood virtues. And for the magazine writers of to-day, the very last thing in the world that they would think of writing about is culture. Possibly there are a few popular lecturers still alive who have a discourse upon this subject in their list. But we know very well what most of us would do if such a lecturer came to town, preceded by the announcement that his theme was to be culture: we should stay at home, unless he were a very famous man indeed, and we felt reasonably confident that before he got very far in his lecture he would wander a long way from his topic, and never return to it; just as we should do if it were announced that the lecturer's topic would be Life, or Honesty, or Goodness, or any other subject at once vague and worn.

It is certainly true that culture, the word and the thing, was once a good deal talked about and written about, was a well-worn theme when our generation dropped it, or all but dropped it, turning it over, as it did, to those guileless classes to which allusion has been made: Chautauqua and other popular lecturers, and college teachers; classes notoriously deficient in the ability to discriminate between living ideas and dead ones—if one may say that without disrespect to the political gentlemen who more and more abound on the Chautauqua platform, and who do not, of course, fall under this condemnation. Doubtless the world

is very little the better for all the discussions of culture in which it has in the past indulged; though heaven forbid that any such test as the degree to which the discussion of it has demonstrably contributed to the real happiness and well-being of the world, should ever be applied to any of the topics which, in our consciously virtuous moments, we poor mortals worry and madden ourselves over, in the belief that when thus engaged we are acting a wiser and more creditable part than when more lightly engaged; than when talking about our neighbors, for example. No one, finally, will be disposed to deny that culture is a topic of surpassing vagueness—a vagueness so admirable that he must be a fool indeed who cannot discuss it with the appearance of considerable wisdom, provided only he do it with a sufficient degree of solemnity and a sufficient appearance of confidence in his own brazen platitudes. What, after all, though, is so harmless for purposes of discussion as a platitude? The elaboration of a platitude arouses no antagonism, wounds no sensibilities, and at the very worst brings the care-charmer sleep to some, or to all, who find themselves upon the scene where the platitudes are ringing forth. Let us therefore for a little while yield ourselves up, each in his own way,—some to sigh, it may be, and some to sleep,—let us yield ourselves for a little while to the influence of such amiable platitudes as our vague and venerable subject will enable us to conjure up for a few moments out of the great abyss of platitudes.

What is culture? The fact that no satisfactory definition of it has ever been given, has led some people more than half to question whether there is any such thing. Probably no one, however, who is likely so much as to glance at an article about culture, needs to be told that to deny the reality of a thing because the word which does its poor best to name that thing is not definable in clear-cut terms, and in a manner universally satisfactory, is to show one's self very unfamiliar indeed with the limitations of the dictionary. Many of the most vital terms in language are not thus definable—perhaps it would be safe to say most such terms are not; terms which fall from our lips every hour, terms which, however vague, have behind them facts so sternly real that we could not ignore them for a day without be-

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ing kicked out of decent society, or perhaps even getting ourselves abolished altogether as pestiferous and unlimited nuisances. One may say, indeed, that the world leads a hand-to-mouth existence in its dealing with these terms; it is never quite sure that in a little while it may not have to require of them very different service from that which it has been getting from them. Hence, completely and permanently to clarify our understanding of these terms is impossible. If by any chance there comes to be a fairly general agreement about the meaning of one of them to-day, by to-morrow the sweep of thought or of events may have brought into high light some phases of the matter which the term attempts to identify, will have obscured or completely darkened other phases, and lo! the process of clarification is all undone. For some of us are always lagging behind the sweep of events, and shall therefore to-morrow be using the old term in to-day's sense, instead of in to-morrow's; doing, it may be, deadly mischief thereby. And as laggards do not all lag alike, consider how utterly the work of clarification is likely to be undone by day after to-morrow, or even later in the week yet, when I, perhaps, have fallen behind three or four days, my next-door neighbor two days, and even you yourself one day; while, to make the confusion utterly hopeless, Smith, with the everlasting obtrusiveness of his race, has thrust himself where, for your comfort and mine, he has no business to be, namely, two or three days ahead of the sweep of thought and events; from which vantage point he yells back at us peaceable and slower-going citizens absurd drivel about being in advance of his time, the gloriousness of martyrdom for the sake of truth and progress, and other like boastful and insulting remarks.

It is hardly necessary to give any example of this fluidity of terms. Any good dictionary is crammed with such examples. No dictionary, indeed, can ever tell the thousandth part of the story, since even modern dictionaries have a limited capacity, and since—a far more important reason—oblivion speedily passes over the greater part of the story which the dictionary maker would have to tell, if he wanted to give a complete account of any word in the popular vocabulary; any word, that is to say, that has been much used by all sorts of persons, or nearly

all; therefore, any thoroughly vital word. Who of us that has dipped even a little into Plato, followed even cursorily the movement of subsequent ethical teaching and speculation, and read with the least degree of thoughtfulness the history of the events as the result of which democracy and socialism have come into the world—who but knows that, in a certain sense, the whole history of the civilized world since Plato has represented an attempt to agree upon and realize in the domain of fact a clear and universally satisfactory definition of the word Justice? Ah, if I could but have justice! man has said passionately, if not from the beginning, at least from very early times in the history of his life on this earth; and it is hardly too much to say that, in the long history of man, as often as that cry has been uttered, whether in public or in private, it has meant a different thing, when it has meant anything at all beyond a vague discontent. That is to say, if every time that cry has escaped human lips, a world had been created exactly to meet its demands, it is hardly possible to believe that the same world would ever have been called for twice. No; the attempt at universal agreement upon the concept of justice, to say nothing of its realization in the actual world of human relationships, is an attempt which, while it will probably always continue to be made, can in the nature of things never be successful; and that not merely because the material to be worked upon is obdurate, but far more for the reasons already elaborated. We may compare the concept of Justice to the plan of a house, the realization of that concept to the finished building. Our plan and our building, however, both stand in hard case, if we can for the moment overlook the mild approach to a bull in speaking of our house as standing at all while it is still but a-planing. For every human being on earth insists on having a hand in our plan; and not only that, but every one of the multitudinous architects is forever changing his mind regarding the location or the desirability of a hall here or a window there, about the proper size and general shape of the house, even about the nature of the material out of which it is to be built. Everyone, therefore, is perpetually rubbing out not only the lines which he himself has made, but also those made by his fellow architects. Is it any wonder

that the plan is never finished to the satisfaction of anybody, or that the building is never begun? Is it any wonder that Justice is never realized in the world, since those whose business it is to realize it and whose blessing it would be to enjoy it, do not know what it is?

Our comparison is in some respects not fortunate. In the building of a house, such proceedings as have here been described would be unutterably grotesque. The facts which the comparison was meant to illustrate are not in the least grotesque. Reason and logic are among the guides of human life. They are perhaps its most important, and, on the whole, its safest guides; but as a mere matter of fact we know very well that they are far from being its absolute rulers. Not a little of the charm of existence comes from the effort to achieve the unattainable, and what is often, more or less dimly, no doubt, recognized as such. You and I know full well that, worry about it as much as ever we may, we shall not succeed in making our neighbors much better than they are. Do and say what we will, we know they are sure to go on violating the plainest dictates of common sense, in the simplest as well as in the more difficult relations of life; they will continue to be dull and stupid, failing absurdly in the future as they have done in the past, to appreciate the good things we say and do, and putting an utterly exaggerated estimate upon their own rather pitiful accomplishments in similar directions; and they will make themselves ridiculous in the future as they have done in the past, parading their weakness before the world under the curious delusion that they are not weaknesses but most amiable characteristics, perhaps, even, virtues so fine and rare as to make their possessors unique in their generation, or at least in their neighborhood. But does the fact—which we early learn to be a fact—does the fact that our neighbors are practically unimprovable, make us any the less disposed to give them a sharp disciplinary whack on this occasion, a good piece of advice on that one; and, in general, does it render us any the less disposed to hold over them the whips of correction and let loose upon them the tongue of rebuke, in so far as these things can be done without too serious inconvenience or danger to ourselves? Or again, do not all of us, no matter what our

creeds, over and over again admit, even if only in our secret minds, the futility of our attempting really to fathom the mysteries with which religion concerns itself? Does not the devoutest believer, no matter what the god or system he adores, in the presence of some inscrutable and awful fact, bow his head and give over the riddle of things by saying, His will, not ours, be done? But do men's thoughts pursue these mysteries to the dark regions where it is imagined their secret may lie, or try to pursue them, with any the less of eager and appalled interest because men know in their hearts, whatever their lips may say, that the veil which hides these mysteries will not be lifted in this world? With far greater interest, rather!

Let us come back to culture. A vague term, it is; let that be granted. But this is not equivalent to admitting that it is a mere dream of the mind, chimera, pretentious sham, non-existent virtue which some men have got credit and perhaps worldly advantage by laying claim to. It is even nothing whatever against culture that the term, and therefore the thing it names, is vague. We have seen that the most vital words in language, the words which stand for ideas that are woven, so to speak, all around and through men's lives, are very apt to be vague words; and we have seen that, from the nature of thought and language, and their relation to one another and to the growing or at least the varied and changing life of man, this must be so. For it is the popular mind that is the maker of language, vital language, the current coin of communication between all men, as distinguished from mere words in a dictionary; and the popular mind is not only a changeable thing without unitary life, a thing that can receive no commands and will therefore obey none, a thing that cannot be driven into conformity and consistency, not though the press, the dictionary makers, and the pedagogues of the world should agree—inconceivable and impossible agreement!—not only themselves to use all words in one simple, consistent, and unchanging sense, but to visit with their high displeasure all who do not follow them absolutely in these matters, to the minutest shade of a thought.

Culture, then, is a vague term, granted. It has meant many different things, and it will mean many more before the opera-

tion of social forces shall have levelled all the differences between men which the word in the course of its long life will have denoted and connoted, as the books on rhetoric say. But now having conceded the worst that can be said against our term culture, and therefore against the usefulness of the distinction, or the supposed distinction, which the term names, let us turn our attention to the more pleasant and perhaps more profitable task of seeking, very briefly, a few of the more important elements making up what we conceive to be the indisputable and invariable part of the contents of the term. For part at least of the contents of almost any term of the kind I have been speaking of is not seriously disputable, is, if not exactly invariable in all cases, at least not so rapidly variable but that the world can at any given time hope to have a fairly working conception of it. Such a conception will satisfy plain people who think in the rough and think chiefly to live; though it will be far, of course, from satisfying either the idealist or the pedant. But as neither the idealist nor the pedant can ever be satisfied in this world anyway, plain, practical people may ignore them here, as they generally do.

We can perhaps get at the heart of our term most conveniently if we turn the abstract into the concrete, or, more properly, turn from the abstract to the concrete, and ask ourselves, not what are indisputable elements in culture, but what, if anything, it is that must indisputably characterize the person whom we are willing to call a person of culture.

Perhaps it would be well first to mention a few of the marks which a person does not need, necessarily, to possess, in order that we may rightly regard him as a person of culture. The person of culture, then, need not have all the virtues. Culture, that is to say, is not synonymous with perfection. People of fine instincts but of loose habits of thinking do not a little mischief by thus reading into a word of good implication a long list of admirable things that constitute no proper part of its meaning; and probably they do a good deal more mischief by treating words of bad implication in the same way. Who, for example, does not remember how all the categories of criminality were confused in the frenzied popular discussions of the term

anarchy which were heard in this country in the weeks immediately following the assassination of President McKinley? Who of us but remembers how impossible it was for any useful discussion of anarchy as a social phenomenon to go on in that atmosphere of crazy intellectual confusion? Culture is an admirable thing in its limited way. But the man of culture is not necessarily a good man. He may have every vice that springs from the selfish or the cold heart. He may even be a person of profoundly immoral life—some of the men and women of rarest culture have been. Charles James Fox seems to have been such a man. It is related of Fox that in the hour before his death, when he could no longer see, he cried out to some one among those who were watching by him, “Read me the sixth book of Virgil!” Such a cry at such a time can have come only from a man of rare culture; and no man of his time—his time, we may remember, was not a nice and dainty time, either—no man of his time had trampled upon most of the moralities and shocked all the moralists of his day so often as poor Fox.

Again, the person of culture need not be a person of refined and gracious manners. He is rather more apt to be made that by his culture, to be sure, than he is to be made a very virtuous person; for the influences which come to the flower in culture can far more easily affect the manners, incidentally, than they can master the animal passions of one type of man, or warm the cold heart of another. One may, indeed, admit that a man's manners are often powerfully, if incidentally, affected for good by his culture. But not even manners are necessarily so affected. The great apostle of culture in his day, a man who battled for it all his life against Philistine hosts, was Matthew Arnold. Arnold was as surely a person of culture as the modern world has known; and Arnold is chiefly remembered by some people, it is to be feared, because of one or two rather outrageous violations of good manners of which he was guilty when he visited this country, and which were so singular that they have passed into story. Or consider Tennyson; undeniably, one may suppose, a man of ripest culture. The literature of nineteenth century anecdote has no richer pages than those which reveal how far from gracious Tennyson's manners often were.

If it be said that the most remarkable among these stories of Tennyson's ungracious manners have to do with his efforts to avoid or to get rid of bores who had invaded or were trying to invade his privacy, one must reply that Tennyson had, of course, a perfect right to save himself from bores, even admiring bores, if he could, but that his manner of doing this was usually such as to make it impossible to accord him the praise of graciousness of manners. There have been men and women, surely, who have been able to get rid of bores far more effectively than Tennyson ever could, and have done it without a trace of Tennyson's brusque, even brutal manner.

Culture, once more, has nothing whatever to do with the way one carries one's body, or manages one's legs and arms. Of culture, indeed, one may say, with a rather grotesque inversion of our ordinary manner of speaking, and yet say very truly, that no arms are too long to reach it, no legs too long and ungainly to carry their owner to it. Before some kinds of audience, it would be rather necessary to insist on this point; before an audience of present-day freshmen in a coeducational college or university in the middle West, for instance. In this great region, the freshman of to-day, who is always, of course, first and foremost in search of culture, seems to tend more and more to regard culture as somehow indissolubly connected with the art of manipulating one's legs gracefully, even rhythmically. Accordingly, somewhat early in his career as a student, as soon, indeed, as he has lost his initial terror of his instructors, and found them to be mere men and women not very different from himself, and possessed of no mysterious power to make him work at his studies any harder than he chooses to do, he is very likely to join a dancing school. In his letters home, he defends this independent step out into the world, on high cultural grounds, and, if one may judge by the results, usually does it so eloquently as to carry conviction home to the parental mind; thus, by the way, making the first movement which, in many a home, is to end in theological catastrophe—perhaps in the overthrow of the good Methodist principles of a life-time! Nevertheless, even if we should happen to sympathize with the freshman's social ambitions, we must yet tell him, in the interests

of stern veracity and the dictionary, that culture and the art of dancing are things which have absolutely nothing whatever to do with one another, though, in the manifold and labyrinthine relationships of life, they may now and then come into more or less casual contiguity.

It is perhaps more than time, however, for us to leave these negatives, these discussions of what are not marks of the person of culture. We are trying, remember, not to get at what *ought* to be essential elements in the concept of culture, but rather at what *are* such elements, if one may judge from the affirmations and denials of which culture is the subject, made by popular usage when it is really thinking, and not merely talking, if one may for the moment venture somewhat boldly to personify popular usage. There is, I think, one essential mark of a person of culture, and that is an appreciative familiarity with a considerable body of the best art of the world, and, primarily, with the best literature. By *literature* here is not meant *belles-lettres* only, of course, but all great books, even all books having high worth of substance and distinct charm of style; *belles-lettres*, however, undoubtedly holding the most conspicuous place. The popular conception, if I have judged rightly regarding the fact, makes literature thus primary because, in our day and world, at least, it is the most influential of all the arts, and the one of immeasurably widest range, appealing as it has been made to do, over and over again, to all the manifold interests of man's nature as no other art can apparently ever be made to do, by any force of genius in the artist, because of the nature of the material in which all the other arts work. So dominant, indeed, is literature among the arts, that popular speech would hardly deny the praise of culture to the man who had read appreciatively most of the great literature of the world, or a considerable part of it, merely because he had no ear for music, or no eye for form and color, or even if he were so unfortunate as to be deficient in both these particulars; though undoubtedly his culture is regarded as a finer and fuller sort whose appreciative familiarity with great art includes the works of Beethoven, and Raphael, and Michael Angelo, as well as the works of Virgil and Shakespeare.

It is important to note that mere *familiarity* with great art is not sufficient to constitute an essential mark of culture: it must be appreciative familiarity, such familiarity as that implied in Fox's dying cry, "Read me the sixth book of Virgil!" A man may have read all the great literature in all languages, ancient and modern, without being in any degree a man of culture. For he may have read all his literature as many and many a wretched pedant who is teaching literature has read *his* literature: not at all because he cares for it, but solely in order that he may master the mechanics of an art by means of which to earn his daily bread. Or he may read it as the philologist reads it: in order that he may transform as much of it as possible into linguistic points, to be submitted to the envious and admiring scrutiny of his co-workers at the next meeting of their association; perhaps, even, that he may have more linguistic points to submit on that occasion than some rival philologist. Probably in the minds of most men the philologist is the typical dry-as-dust; and this is simply because, widely as he reads, his reading, by reason of his peculiar notion of values, cannot be the appreciative reading that marks the man of culture. Of course there are philologists who are true men of culture, men who have learned to read in two different manners: a business manner, and an appreciative, a cultural manner. But if one may judge the ordinary philologist by what he publishes, it must be as nearly impossible for him to read a great piece of literature appreciatively as it would be, let us say, for a butcher to write sentimental poetry about calves and lambs.

But how is all this to the purpose? If a mark is really to be a mark, it must be visible; and how is the man of culture to convince us that he has an appreciative familiarity with the best art of the world? By telling us that he has? That would not be modest; and moreover, we might not believe him. By "chatter about Shelley," in Professor Freeman's savage phase, and about other renowned artists in literature, music, painting, and sculpture? That is the way taken, with pathetic unsucess, by two-thirds of your dear acquaintances and mine who, though they are not persons of culture, think they are, and want us to think so, and succeed only in convincing us that they are either

simpletons or mere common bores. The fact is, that while we all like to have our good qualities recognized, yet real culture is the most unobtrusive of all good qualities. Self-confessed culture is perhaps always sham culture. But the real thing is not noisy, does not claim the rewards of public recognition. Far more truly may it be said of culture than of virtue, that it is its own exceeding great reward. For virtue has often betrayed her children to poverty, to disease, to torture, to the dungeon and the stake—or in modern days, though, let us hope, less often, to the penitentiary and the gallows; but culture commits no betrayals, abiding with its possessor, faithful friend and consoler, until insanity or death finishes the tale.

It is not culture, indeed, that can bestow upon its possessor the power to face with a calm mind long-continued disappointment and failure. It is not culture that can enable him to pass with fortitude through the agony into which virtue leads some of her children, and into which the strange and tragic concatenation of things leads all of us, once and again. These great powers to endure are the original gifts of the gods to their favorites, and are either granted or withheld, once for all. But culture has often enabled men to forget for a happy hour their long-continued disappointment and failure, and thus in the space of a lifetime has made it possible for them to gather strength for many a brave renewal of the fight; and if it has not been able to save even its dearest children from the more awful calamities of life, it has at least saved them from brooding, with morbid anticipation, upon the greater horrors to come in the world beyond.

“Read me the sixth book of Virgil!”—so we may imagine poor Charles Fox’s mind to have worked as he lay dying—“read me the sixth book of Virgil! For the last time let my thoughts wander with Æneas and the Cumæan Sibyl to that wonderful infernal world whose reality I do not fear, and whose spell Virgil’s glorious lines cast forever upon my imagination in those dear old Eton days!”

Ah, how proud of our culture you and I might be, in our secret hearts, if we could ever come to love one of the great masterpieces of the world’s art with a love like that!

R. D. O’LEARY.

Lawrence, Kansas.